



40 Espontáneos. Choreography: La Ribot. Photo: Sebastian Durand

LAUGHING, CRYING, CONTAGION, COLLAPSE

Martin Hargreaves explores the infectious logic of La Ribot's new work
40 Espontáneos

I am interested in the meaning of espontáneos in the language of bullfighting and in the way it was defined to me by an expert: an espontáneos is the person who jumps into the bullring and steals the show from the bullfighter, breaking the rules of the game and adding an unnecessary overdose of danger to the celebration.

These espontáneos are not going to jump into the ring but onto the stage and although this act has a certain aspect of danger, it is not a slaughter but something that I will continue to call art.'

As I walk into the main theatre at Le Quartz, Brest, I'm immediately confused. The auditorium is scattered with objects – chairs and sofas and fly-posters – and the seats are draped with bright, colourful and cheap charity-shop clothes. The lights are up in both the house and on stage, which is open and bare except for more piles of clothes and material and large sheets of card-

board in stacks. My ticket (marked *place libre*) doesn't indicate where I'm supposed to sit and the sudden necessity of making a decision about where my proper place is in this transformed space (a *place libre*) raises some anxiety. Indeed I see other audience members in a similar moment of suspension; what are we going to watch? Where therefore should we watch it from? How



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close do we sit to these 'props' (if indeed that's what they are) without risking being drawn into the action of the performance? Admittedly I'm slightly prepared for this, having seen La Ribot's series of distinguished pieces in galleries where the audience navigate their own pathway, parallel to La Ribot's journey through the stations of objects.² However, the piles of clothes and upturned furniture, the spillage of theatricality and symbolic objects beyond the frame, particularly violate the architecture of the proscenium. The frontal representational apparatus of the theatre has collapsed producing a strange feeling of vertigo. Although eventually everyone sits somewhere, this moment of suspension, of an active re-engagement in the plane of vision extends throughout the piece.

Without announcement performers walk on stage, making straight for the piles of clothes, which they layer on top of their own. Some of these *espontáneos* carry on walking and in various ways jump down from the lip of the stage and continue up the aisles. They are smiling, giggling and laughing as they start to collect the scattered artefacts, either carrying them back on stage or dressing in them. This breach of the edge of the stage acts as a signal for several audience members to reveal themselves as planted performers as they rise out of their seats to join in the process of collection. Performers occasionally stop, sit on one of the chairs brought on stage, and watch the reclamation of objects being assembled into a montage across the floor. This continuous slippage between spectator and observer, or rather the suspension of these definitions, is particularly enacted through the laughter. At its first appearance it appears out of place – there's nothing to laugh at, nothing

funny – and the fact that these performers are listed as non-professionals raises the threat that it could be 'corpsing': the unscripted, nervous fall into uncontrollable laughter made all the more unstoppable precisely because of its impropriety. There's nothing funnier than unlicensed hilarity (Dudley Moore's poor attempts to disguise his laughter at Peter Cook were often funnier than their sketches). Although it becomes clear that all of the performers are laughing, and it therefore must be part of the performance, it still carries an illegal charge as the laughter feeds on itself and spreads out into the audience, who laugh at laughs, corpsing themselves. There are belly laughs, titters, sniggers, snorts, giggles, guffaws, chortles and chuckles – like speech, each laugh gives something of the person away – and some prove to be infectious as they are caught and rapidly induce symptomatic breakouts throughout the whole theatre.

It never, however, develops into the kind of licensed amusement you find at comedy shows – there is no object for the humour except the laughter itself and this laughter keeps moving. Individuals don't merge into mass hysterics (either on stage or off) but find their own way through the continuous laughter, it ebbs and flows in irregular waves; sometimes nervous, sometimes embarrassing, sometimes isolating, sometimes genuine, sometimes unstoppable. The pathological language we commonly use to talk about laughing is particularly relevant here; Maria Ribot tells me the next day 'its all about contagion' and its true that the audience, the auditorium, the stage and the performers are continuously involved in exchanges which cross distinct roles and contaminate defined places. We 'pick up' the



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disease to 'fall ill' or we feel like we are 'coming down' with something – all actions of collapse, of sinking, of lying down (we're 'laid up' with the laughter). Maria describes how it goes through cycles of true and false laughter – the workshops leading up to the piece (which will be repeated in the other cities the piece visits) are concerned with a physical examination of what and how the body laughs (and later cries) and the group train themselves to perform these actions. There is no emotional or psychological depth which needs to be accessed – instead the focus is on the bodies (La Ribot specifically refers to it as 'exploring the intelligent body') and laughing, crying, carrying, dressing, undressing, running, walking, falling and lying down are performed as they are and as they need to be. The audience members contract these actions, they may resonate in different ways as they infect the spectator, but it is not to psychoanalysis (or semiotics) that we need to look for a cure, but to our own bodies, permeable and collapsing but also intelligent.

The montage constructed on stage of objects – beautifully colourful and textured – is gradually overlaid with bodies as one by one the espontaneos lie down, holding or propping against their prone bodies a sheet of paper with a number. The numbers are not sequential and they could

be scorecards, lot numbers, or the identifying sheet pinned to dance clothes in an audition – someone even has 666, the mark of the beast (or possibly an upside-down 999) – and there's an arbitrary anonymity to these codes. The bodies still shake with laughter but this gradually segues into crying as they begin to heave and sob. The sourceless sorrow seems more theatrical than the laughing and yet the hidden faces and trembling bodies still sting the audience as the mood perceptibly drops. The fact that they are not crying at anything, or at least anything we can know about, again affects audience members as individuals as we are not given any rules on how to respond (this is not tragedy). Empathy, embarrassment, pity, indifference, even catharsis – the choice is ours. The crying gradually shifts back up into laughter (I later find out that everything is coordinated to a time-track) and all the performers stand up and quickly destroy the montage – pooling and piling all the elements into the middle of the stage. A range of activities is then introduced – some espontaneos re-assemble their layered outfit and stand isolated to present themselves to the audience, complete with their number, while others melt to the ground or run and fall. There is also contact as some hug each other, one partner gradually sinking from the embrace. The stage space blurs with action and

colour and objects (particularly, it seems, high-heeled shoes) are thrown off stage whilst a careful operation of reconstructing the montage is undertaken. This time it only contains the red items (reminiscent of *Another Bloody Mary*, one of the *distinguished pieces*, where La Ribot lies in a pool of red items, objects seeping from under her splayed body) but this haemorrhaging assemblage is not completed before it is covered with the sheets of cardboard, quickly fetched from the stacks and urgently laid over all surfaces including the furniture. The red hue of the lights shifts into a glacial blue, giving a cool shimmer to the angular landscape under which the bloody red cannot be seen.

Again the espontáneos lie down, only partially visible amongst the cardboard, and there is a moment of stillness and relative silence (they are still laughing). The intrusive and irritating tones of ringing mobile phones cuts in and there's a fraction of a moment where it seems that an audience member has disobeyed the call to switch off their phone – the cacophony is however coming from stage as the espontáneos again invert the decorum of audience behaviour into another rule of their performance. Layered into a sound collage, the beeps and chimes transcend the banality of their tinny tunelessness to become truly polyphonic, a strange chorus of teletechnology singing the ambiguity of 'personalising' a ringtone (your ringing phone can now say something about you, and not something you necessarily intend to communicate). The final image is of these phones held up; faces lit as multicoloured squares of light on the darkened stage.

André Lepecki and Laurent Goumarre have written about La Ribot's work in relationship to a deconstruction of representation and both authors stress the horizontality of the work, its interrogation of perspective and the deterritorialisation of the performance moment.¹ This is especially pronounced in the theatre at Le Quartz which has the tiered seats, the raised and framed stage, all the architecture of spectacle, which breaks down, heaves and shifts throughout the performance of *40 Espontáneos*. Jacques Blanc, the director of Le Quartz (who co-produced the piece), makes a link in the programme



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notes between the espontáneos and the masses of hopefuls who overpopulate TV programmes, the anonymous amateurs who risk everything for a moment of recognition. The whole point of these many programmes is the promise of individualism par excellence; celebrity status and the chance to rise above the crowd to increase your value as an exchangeable object within various commodity markets. *40 Espontáneos* doesn't counter this with a false community or forced mass identification, instead it proposes the pleasurable pathology of deconstructing the allure of performance. The beauty of objects, the glamour of exhibition, the thrill of recognition and the fear of isolation all have their place in this piece – or rather their place is contested, mobilised, redeployed and contaminated through the recognition of the intelligence of bodies which are doing, not expressing or representing. As spectators we cannot consume the hidden virtuosity of these non-professionals, nor enjoy *schadenfreude* at their failures because finally they do not rise above us nor do we coalesce into a singular audience – we communicate, exchange and infect one and another, catching, contracting and falling down.

- 1 Statement by La Ribot from artsadmin website www.artsadmin.co.uk
- 2 See Sophie Hansen's interview with Maria Ribot in *Dance Theatre Journal* Vol 17 no. 1, pp 16-19 for a discussion of this in relation to *Still Distinguished*.
- 3 André Lepecki, 'Toppling the visual: Panoramix and the weight of vision' in *Exhausting Dance* (Routledge, forthcoming) and Laurent Goumarre 'Pour une esthétique de la posture' in *Art Press*, September 2002 pp 41-45.

Martin Hargreaves is the Editor of *Dance Theatre Journal*.

For more details on La Ribot's work, including future workshops and performances of *40 Espontáneos*, see www.laribot.com

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